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‘YOU CAN COUNT ON US’: WHEN MALIAN DIPLOMACY STRATCOMMED UNCLE SAM AND THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN COMMUNICATION

Pablo de Orellana

How did North African states depict their nomadic minorities to the US during the War on Terror in the 2000s? How did this shape American policy in the region? Focusing on Malian-American diplomacy and drawing on post-structuralist analytics of identity-formation, this paper first examines how Malian diplomacy represented nomadic minorities in communication with US diplomatic and military envoys during the period 2002–2010. It is found that Mali consistently branded Saharan nomads as lawless subjects that make territory ungovernable, compromise security, and facilitate terrorism. Second, this paper deploys intertextual analysis to measure the success of these strategic communications efforts. It is found that, despite the advice of some American diplomats on the ground, by the end of 2008 Mali’s depiction of Saharan nomadism had been absorbed into US diplomacy. This subsumed Northern Malian subjects into the categories of the War on Terror, which privileged military control of subjects and territory over development and reconciliation efforts. This policy shift granted Mali influence over US policy and diplomatic support to ignore nomadic grievances. Analysis reveals the key role of identity-making and name-calling in Mali-US relations and in diplomatic communication more broadly, showcasing the potential of textual analysis methods to evaluate strategic communications outcomes.

Keywords: *counterterrorism, identity, North Africa, diplomacy, Tuareg, Mali, strategic communication, strategic communications*

About the Author

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Introductory démarches

Diplomatic communication was deeply involved in achieving a key shift in US policy towards counterterrorism and security in North Africa. In the early 2000s, US policy anticipated countering extremism in the Sahara through social, human rights, and economic development. By late 2008, however, though nearly imperceptibly, policy had changed to the opposite approach, one seeking control of these same subjects and territory before addressing their pressing grievances. This policy shift was predicated on depicting the Tuareg as 'terror-enabling bandits', a depiction which had long been promoted by Malian diplomacy.

In the early 2000s US policy was concerned that the Western Sahel could provide safe haven for Islamic terrorism,¹ particularly after the Algerian Civil war when the remnants of Islamist forces found refuge in the porous borderlands between Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Libya.² US diplomats agreed that counterterrorism in the Sahel depended on successfully addressing the grievances of Tuareg and Arab minorities in the north of Mali, who had staged major rebellions in the 1960s and 1990s.³ Initial responses, the Pan-Sahel Initiative (2002–2004) and its successor the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), sought to provide resilience to terrorism rather than combat it, and were led by the State Department and US Agency for International Development (USAID) with Department of Defense (DoD) support.⁴ The initiative was framed in the context of the Millennium Development Goals and managed various funding streams to address development problems and grievances fuelling radicalisation, and to promote human rights, democratic governance, and improved gender and ethnic

1 See for instance 'Statement from Senator Coons on Situation in Mali', 22 March 2012.; Lawrence Cline, 'Counterterrorism Strategy in the Sahel', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, No 10 (18 September 2007), 889–899.

2 Rear Admiral Hamlin Tallent testimony before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Non-Proliferation (10 March 2005). Cited in Lianne K. Boudali, *The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership*, (The Combating Terrorism Center, West Point US Military Academy, April 2007), 1.

3 6/3/2008, BAMA KO239. Wikileaks documents cited by date and original State Department reference number.

4 Bray, F. J., *The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership: Strategy and Institutional Friction*, (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: US Army War College, 22 March 2011).

relations.⁵ Mali did almost nothing to implement this development-based approach or reconciliation in the north of the country.⁶

North African postcolonial states have long had problems in integrating and governing nomadic minorities. Bound by the borders drawn up by European colonial convenience, the ancient peoples of the Sahara—the Tuareg and other Berbers such as the Kabyle or Moroccan Amazigh, and Arabised Berbers such as the Sahrawi, Berabiche, and Moors—are now divided among Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. In the Middle Ages, ever-shifting tribal federations drove Islamic expansion in North Africa and Al-Andalus, though then and now these federations have been temporary and fragile.⁷ Colonial division of the Sahara challenged the very feasibility of their social and economic existence, and upon independence from France in 1960, the Tuareg and other nomadic and semi-nomadic minorities were divided into northern Mali, southern Algeria, and Libya. While Algeria and Libya were able to co-opt—and occasionally coerce—Tuaregs into an apparently sustainable, if strained, status quo, Mali and Niger have long sought either to ignore them or to control them militarily. In Mali and Niger the Tuareg rose in arms against the Malian state in 1962, 1990, 2006, and 2012, and against Niger in 2007. Rebellions drew on existing and, crucially, ever-shifting systems of alliances,⁸ while even the very definition of Tuareg identity varied. The uprisings were fuelled by urgent economic, social, environmental, and military grievances, and

5 Boudali, *The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership*.

6 Pezard, Stephanie and Michael Shurkin, *Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts, and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), p. 41.

7 See Guichaoua, Yvan, ‘Circumstantial Alliances and Loose Loyalties in Rebellion Making: The Case of Tuareg Insurgency in Northern Niger (2007–2009)’, in *Understanding Collective Political Violence*, (N.P.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 246–266; Guichaoua, Yvan (ed.), *Understanding Collective Political Violence*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Baz Lecocq et al., ‘One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts: A Multivocal Analysis of the 2012 Political Crisis in the Divided Republic of Mali’, *Review of African Political Economy* 40, No 137 (1 September 2013), 343–357; Lecocq, Baz and Jean Sebastian Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 433.

8 See the major debate of the 1990s between Bourgeot and Hélène Claudot-Hawad on Tuareg identity and social structure and its modern and late modern development, especially Bourgeot, André, ‘Identité Touarègue: De l’aristocratie à La Révolution’, *Études Rurales* No 120 (1990), 129–162; ‘Le Corps Touareg Désarticulé Ou l’impensé Politique (The Disjointed Tuareg Body, or Political Unimagination)’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 34, No 136 (1994), 659–671; ‘Révoltes et Rébellions En Pays Touareg’, *Afrique Contemporaine* No 170 (1994), 3–19; ‘Les Rébellions Touarègues: Une Cause Perdue?’, *Afrique Contemporaine* No 180 (1996), 99–115; Hélène Claudot-Hawad, *Les Touaregs. Portrait En Fragments* (Edisud, 1993); ‘Identité et altérité d’un point de vue touareg’ (1996), 7–16; ‘La Hiérarchie Des Savoirs et Des Pouvoirs Dans La Société Touarègue Précoloniale et La Recomposition Des Rôles Socio-Politiques Pendant La Guerre Anticoloniale et Après La Défaite’, *Nomadic Peoples* 2, No 1/2 (1998), 17–38; ‘A Nomadic Fight against Im-mobility: The Tuareg in the Modern State’, in *Nomadic Societies in The Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century*, ed. D. Chatty (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 654–681; Hélène Claudot-Hawad et al., *Touaregs. Exil et Résistance*, ed. Hélène Claudot-Hawad (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1990).

their lack of influence over the states in which they reside;⁹ most of them resulted in repression by Mali and Niger, frequently supported by the French. Droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, and the conflicts themselves, drove many into exile in Algeria as well as Gaddafi's Libya, their only state protector.¹⁰ The US policy of ending this cycle of crushing poverty, violence, exile, and rebellion through social, political, and economic development was extremely sensible.

By late 2008, however, US counterterrorism policy in the Sahel had become significantly militarised and security-led.¹¹ It moved from addressing lack of development, infrastructure, human rights, political representation, and services, towards a military-to-military partnerships approach.¹² The shift was most evident when core channels of funding, policy, and implementation became military-led. It would appear that the understanding of the problem of extremism in North Africa, and the means available to counter it, were themselves consequently subsumed into a military approach to counterterrorism. Crucially, this shift ended US pressure on Mali to implement the Algiers Accords of 4 July 2006 as a way to counter extremism. The Accords, which had ended the brief Tuareg rebellion of 2006, included redress of Tuareg grievances regarding social, political, and human rights, as well as mixed Malian-Tuareg military units, and economic development in northern Mali.

Throughout 2006–2008, the Malian government had only one position on counterterrorism in the Sahel: military control of territory and subjects. The government led by President Amadou Toumani Touré (also known as ATT) spent most of the 2000s requesting increased American military aid, arguing that the criminality and ungovernability of these nomads prevented successful counterterrorism efforts, and that only military control of space and people could deny al-Qaeda space. Contemporarily, Touré and Malian diplomats continuously rejected or heroically avoided US pressure to prevent extremism through economic development and the resolution of longstanding grievances.¹³ Instead, Touré's administration relied on the so-called 'ATT Consensus' approach, which sought to keep the presidency above party politics (ATT himself ran

9 See also Guichaoua, 'Circumstantial Alliances and Loose Loyalties in Rebellion Making'; Rosa De Jorio, 'Narratives of the Nation and Democracy in Mali', *Cahiers d'études Africaines* № 172 (1 September 2008), 827–856.

10 Bourgeot, 'Révoltes et Rébellions En Pays Touareg'; Ronen, Yehudit, 'Libya, the Tuareg and Mali on the Eve of the "Arab Spring" and in Its Aftermath: An Anatomy of Changed Relations', *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, № 4 (1 September 2013), 213.

11 Zoubir, Yahia H., 'The United States and Maghreb–Sahel Security', *International Affairs* 85, № 5 (1 September 2009), 993.

12 Gutelius, David, 'Islam in Northern Mali and the War on Terror', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25, № 1 (2007), 59–76.

13 See 19/6/2007, 07BAMAKO676.

as an independent) by forging links with individuals across political, civil, and military spheres.¹⁴ In its latter days, this approach came to depend entirely on patronage, in some ways privatising the state into unofficial networks, which vastly increased corruption, alienating those outside the ruling coalition; these outsiders were left feeling voiceless, and their faith in democracy and republican institutions was undermined.¹⁵ In the north of the country, this approach relied on coopting loyal northerners and exploiting longstanding divisions among tribes, strata and castes within tribes, and feuds. Some, such as the Berabiche and some subaltern Tuareg groups, allied with the government to keep rebels in check, while others, such as the Ifoghas, became the targets of greater military control. Key brokers and leaders were bought off, sometimes as ineffectively as happened in Bamako, Mali’s capital, with prominent Ifogha leader Iyad Ag Ghaly. Ag Ghaly was a key Tuareg rebel leader in the 1990s. When his prominence among mainstream Tuareg rebels collapsed due to his collaboration with Bamako in the late 2000s, he reinvented himself as a religious warrior.

Beginning in the aftermath of 9/11, the War on Terror and its core assumptions propelled the militarisation of American counterterrorism policy in the Western Sahel.¹⁶ As the US sought partners against terror, most states in North Africa offered help and requested military assistance. However, their new-found military capacity and diplomatic support were directed against old enemies, such as the Sahrawi for Morocco and the Tuareg for Mali and Niger.¹⁷ We do not need to speculate on Malian intentions, for President Touré’s government consistently sought US assistance to achieve military control of the north, while no progress was ever made towards any other solution.¹⁸ By late 2008, this position had become part of US policy. Crucially, it carried over exactly the same assumptions: control of all north Malian subjects and spaces that were not aligned with the ATT consensus, particularly the Ifoghas. This counterterrorism priority

14 Whitehouse, Bruce, “A Festival of Brigands”: In Search of Democracy and Political Legitimacy in Mali’, *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*; Pretoria 35, № 2 (November 2013), 35–52; Wing, Susanna D., ‘Mali: Politics of a Crisis’, *African Affairs* 112, №. 448 (1 July 2013), 476–485.

15 Bøås, Morten and Liv Elin Torheim, ‘The Trouble in Mali—Corruption, Collusion, Resistance’, *Third World Quarterly* 34, № 7 (1 August 2013), 1279–1292.

16 Zoubir, ‘The United States and Maghreb–Sahel Security’, 987; ‘The Sahara-Sahel Quagmire: Regional and International Ramifications’, *Mediterranean Politics* 17, № 3 (November 1, 2012, 452–458; McFate, Sean, ‘U.S. AFRICA COMMAND: A New Strategic Paradigm?’, *Military Review*; *Fort Leavenworth* 88, № 1 (February 2008), 10–21; Cline, ‘Counterterrorism Strategy in the Sahel’.

17 Solomon, Hussein, ‘The African State and the Failure of US Counter-Terrorism Initiatives in Africa: The Cases of Nigeria and Mali’, *South African Journal of International Affairs* 20, № 3 (1 December 2013), 427–445.

18 See also Bøås and Torheim, ‘The Trouble in Mali—Corruption, Collusion, Resistance’; Solomon, ‘The African State and the Failure of US Counter-Terrorism Initiatives in Africa’; Sandor, Adam, ‘Assemblages of Intervention: Politics, Security, and Drug Trafficking in West Africa’, (Thesis, Université d’Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2016), <http://www.ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/34259>.

trumped long-term humanitarian, social, and economic, as well as consensual military, development. The apparent transposition onto US policy of the Malian representation of the conflict suggests that this shift was informed by a shared understanding of the significance of uncontrolled nomads to the US-led War on Terror. Specifically, we are looking at how ‘a very complex environment could be (incorrectly) completely subsumed into a counterterrorism framework’.¹⁹ In other words, this specific representation was persuasive, not in reinventing these subjects as new terrorists, but rather absorbing them into the existing powerful categories of terror-enablers or potential terrorists. We might be observing an example of the dictum on the back of this journal, that ‘perception becomes reality’. This paper enquires into how this was possible.

This incredible diplomatic event was achieved through a tendentious representation of the political identity of nomadic subjects. While diplomacy does not, of course, comprise the totality of a state’s capacity to see the world, it plays a key role in ‘recognising’ other actors. Furthermore, diplomacy is of great interest for scholarly, policy, and strategic research because it reflects and often includes the output of non-diplomatic practices, such as espionage, that also inform policy. This paper analyses this extraordinary act of persuasion and its unfolding in diplomacy, and in so doing makes contributions to understanding strategic communications. It proposes a method to determine how diplomatic communications constitute representations of identity and how these representations develop, and identifies when specific representations cross from the diplomacy of one actor to that of another and are repeated natively, that is, repeated, embraced, and written as their own, demonstrating persuasion. These two vital questions are explored through the case of US-Malian diplomacy during 2006–2010 to allow for the conceptually-driven methods developed by the author to be demonstrated against empirical evidence of diplomatic communication.

This paper takes five steps to address these vital questions of representation and persuasion in diplomatic communication. It first introduces the relevance and potential contribution to strategic communications of post-structuralist discourse analysis, textuality, and conceptualisations of identity. Second, it introduces the reader to the theory-powered diplomatic communication analysis method developed by the author—who should at this point confess to being an International Relations (IR) theorist and diplomatic analyst—and has been demonstrated in a number of historical and contemporary case studies.²⁰ Third, by applying this method, the paper shows how the representation of conflict in the Sahel and of Mali’s nomadic subjects was constituted

19 Cline, Lawrence E. ‘Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, № 8 (1 August 2013), 617.

20 As well as the aforementioned research on US-Malian and US-Moroccan diplomacy, see also de Orellana *The Diplomatic Road to Vietnam*, (London: IB Tauris, forthcoming late 2017).

in the diplomatic communication that was so successful in 2008. Fourth, the analysis follows these representations across years of communications, hundreds of diplomatic cables, memoranda, and other documents, to identify and examine the instances when the representations promoted by Malian diplomacy came to be so persuasive to US diplomacy and policy-making, such that by 2008 they had come to be absorbed and repeated. Finally, the fifth section summarises and synthesises how this study and its methodology can bring empirical and analytical contributions to the understanding of strategic communications. It is argued that this article and its empirical demonstration should encourage placing epistemology, language, and discourse at the centre of strategic communications analysis. Crucially, representation of identity emerges as the most powerful aspect of diplomatic and strategic communications.

Step 1: Diplomats, strategists, admen, and identity

It seems intuitive that name-calling should matter in political practices. Descriptions play a key role in international politics—but how? How can their persuasive success be determined in empirical analysis? In communication, including diplomacy, the difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist is quite literally one of subjective name-calling. Descriptions constitute the subjectivity that distinguishes terrorists from freedom-fighters, which is no less than a normative frame separating good from bad violence. They reflect interpretive and subjective political choices that seek to identify who an actor is. These choices are the product of practices such as diplomacy, policy analysis, journalism, or strategic communications, that locate actors within existing frameworks, thus determining how they should be described. In the categorising frames of the War on Terror, an actor can be described as terrorist, terrorist-enabler, or reliable ally. Long-term, stable, descriptive trends—more accurately called ‘representations’—and the frames that make sense of them, are involved in producing one’s understanding of international actors.²¹

Representations of subjects, conflicts, and the contexts that motivate them are very powerful. This is a basic insight that, despite conceptual differences, can be shared by strategic communications practitioners and post-structuralist, critical, and interpretive IR theorists and analysts. In this shared analytical space provided by the perspective that the *how* of communication is crucial, this paper examines the interpretive requirements of studying representation in diplomatic communication, while adding methods that can unlock their functional dynamics and evaluate their persuasive success. This article

21 Shapiro, M. J., *The Politics of Representation: Writing Practices in Biography, Photography, and Policy Analysis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 12, 48.

addresses practitioner and research interests on what makes communication effective,²² bringing to bear critical IR theory approaches to the question of how representations of political identity function,²³ post-structuralist concepts and methods for analysing text and intertextuality,²⁴ and the growing and conceptually-informed interest in international and particularly diplomatic practices.²⁵

This theory-powered, practice-attentive discursive analysis arsenal is used to analyse US-Malian diplomatic communication during the period 2006–2010. If Mali was able to shift American policy in the late 2000s, it stands as a vital lesson for the study and practice of strategic communications. The evidence so far is extremely suggestive. However, analysis is yet to empirically determine how Malian arguments persuaded US policymakers. It is thus vital to examine how Malian diplomacy represented the situation in the north of the country and whether US diplomats and policymakers believed in this view of the situation and in the proposed solutions.

Diplomacy has long been both a target of and vehicle for strategic communications. Renaissance diplomat-thinkers like Niccolò dei Machiavelli and François de Callières were keenly aware that diplomatic communication, particularly how it described people and situations, had major consequences of strategic significance.²⁶ Studying diplomatic communication requires acknowledging its vast complexity and multifaceted

22 Castells, Manuel, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Miskimmon, Alistair, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (University of Michigan Press, 2012); *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2014); Farwell, James P., *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

23 See Goff, Patricia and Kevin Dunn, *Identity and Global Politics: Theoretical and Empirical Elaborations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Williams, Michael C., 'Identity and the Politics of Security', *European Journal of International Relations* 4, No. 2 (1 June 1998), 204–225; William E. Connolly, 'Identity and Difference in Global Politics', in *International/Intertextual Relations* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989); Campbell, David, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, 2nd Revised edition 1998. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Neumann, Iver B., 'Self and Other in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 2 (1996), 139–174.

24 Derian, J. Der, (ed.), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989); Bakhtin, M. M., *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Charlotte Epstein, 'Who Speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in International Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (2011), 327–350.

25 For the Practice Turn, see Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds., *International Practices* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016). For a focus on diplomacy's production of knowledge, see Neumann, Iver B., *At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

26 See for instance Machiavelli's 'Notule' [notes for ambassadors] in *Tutte Le Opere Storiche, Politiche e Letterarie*, ed. A. Capata (Rome: Newton Compton, 2011); and Louis XIV's ambassador François de Callières, *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains* (Paris: Michel Brunet, 1716).

potential for subjectivity. At any one point, there are several—at least four—streams of communication to study: two-way communication between the diplomat and her bosses, and the same again for her interlocutor speaking on behalf of another state (In our case: US diplomats speaking to Malian officials, US diplomats reporting back home, Malian diplomats doing the same). The diplomatic communicator is part of a vast institution of diplomatic knowledge production.²⁷ Diplomats gather information and report to policymakers back home and receive instructions as to what to say to the representatives of other states, who in turn report to and receive instructions from a similarly complex diplomatic establishment. In other words, because diplomats and diplomatic institutions are both the targets and the messengers of strategic communications, their reports are a locus where depiction, description, and representation are of paramount importance.

Commercially, there is a thriving trade in strategic communications focusing on ‘branding’.²⁸ Communications consultants in Washington, for example, established the Moroccan-American Center for Policy (MACP), which successfully rebranded Morocco as ‘the kingdom on the move’, an ‘exemplary’ ‘Islamic democracy’ ‘naturally’ disinclined to extremism.²⁹ Scholarly literature on this PR approach is primarily concerned with ‘nation branding’, and emphasises the fact that wording can achieve policy goals by favourably representing states. It rests on the assumption that representation of international actors is flexible and that diplomacy, both formal and public, can misrepresent a state.³⁰ The literature raises the question of how diplomatic communication produces the ‘textual image’ of an international actor, whether through tailored lies, or through disingenuous or optimistic writing.

The PR-based literature on ‘nation branding’ thus far appears uninterested in analysing how branding is conceptually constituted, and equally uninterested in empirically determining whether its promotion has been successful. It is suggestive to consider that US policy shifted just as Malian leaders desired, but it does not prove that Malian diplomacy achieved this feat. This is because the study of a brand’s persuasiveness

27 See especially chapter 4 in Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats*.

28 The British firm Portland Communications is a good example.

29 This campaign was so successful that its slogans came to be included in American diplomats’ reports on Morocco. See <http://moroccoonthemove.com> and Pablo de Orellana, ‘Struggles over Identity in Diplomacy: “Commie Terrorists” Contra “Imperialists” in Western Sahara’, *International Relations* 29, No. 4 (1 December 2015), 477–499.

30 Fan, Ying, ‘Branding the Nation: Towards a Better Understanding’, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, no. 2 (May 2010): 97–103; Jian Wang, ‘Managing National Reputation and International Relations in the Global Era: Public Diplomacy Revisited’, *Public Relations Review* 32, No. 2 (June 2006): 91–96; Szondi, Gyorgy, ‘From Image Management to Relationship Building: A Public Relations Approach to Nation Branding’, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, No. 4 (November 2010), 333–343; Szondi, Gyorgy, *Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael 2008).

is hostage to the logic of ‘perception’: how somebody sees something. Since social science cannot (yet) drill into your head and empirically determine how you perceive me, IR scholars have had to find other avenues. Conversely, Jonathan Fisher’s analysis of how Uganda and Kenya managed donor-state perceptions focuses on the ‘images’ communicated in routine diplomacy.³¹ This approach explores *what* diplomatic communication says in terms of identity. It raises the question of how ‘images’ are constituted in diplomacy and how to empirically determine whether and how they are believed enough to be absorbed by another actor’s diplomatic establishment.

The approaches discussed, even the Renaissance diplomatic literature, concur on the importance of how an international actor is seen in cultural, political, and other contexts: its identity. Representation of identity and its links to other representations situate an actor in the international context. Policy, strategy, and political decisions are predicated on calculations of how a group of subjects will behave, which are partly constituted through descriptions that make sense of the subjects, their contexts, past actions, and their motives.³² Representations of political identity, provided by diplomats, analysts, and spies, are immensely influential upon policymaking and strategy.³³ This is why they are the most evident targets of communications strategies, such as Morocco’s ‘kingdom on the move’, and why so much was at stake in persuading American policymakers that Mali’s unruly nomads were global enemies. It is within the construction of representation that we find the key to its subjectivity. This epistemological challenge is ideally addressed through concepts and methods drawn from a post-structuralist approach to identity, and the role of identity in international relations.

Step 2: Reading identity in the text of diplomatic communication

From a post-structuralist perspective, identity is a discourse describing and locating a group of subjects. I say ‘discourse’—a coherent set of statements based on the same subjectivity—because identity is a composite construction constituted of a variety of

31 Fisher, Jonathan, ‘Structure, Agency and Africa in the International System: Donor Diplomacy and Regional Security Policy in East Africa since the 1990s’, *Conflict, Security & Development* 13, No 5 (1 December 2013), 537–567; Fisher, Jonathan ‘“Some More Reliable than Others”: Image Management, Donor Perceptions and the Global War on Terror in East African Diplomacy’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, No 01 (2013), 1–31; Fisher, Jonathan, ‘Managing Donor Perceptions: Contextualizing Uganda’s 2007 Intervention in Somalia’, *African Affairs* 111, No 444 (July 1, 2012), 404–423.

32 Ashley, Richard K., ‘Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War’, in *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*, ed. James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), 89.

33 Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation*, 89–123. A spectacular example is Kissinger’s briefing to Ford on Western Sahara in 1975, in which the entire conflict was reduced to ‘Algeria wants a port’, which made POLISARIO a simple Algerian stooge, in Mundy, Jacob, ‘Neutrality or Complicity? The United States and the 1975 Moroccan Takeover of the Spanish Sahara’, *The Journal of North African Studies* 11, No 3 (2006), 275–306.

contingent referents. Each of these referents, linguistically constructed linking concepts that act as the key building blocks of identity, links subjects or differentiates them from one another. For example, language is a key referent when differentiating between British and French identity. These key referents include ‘deep referents’ that are older and apparently permanent cultural attributes, such as my very Italian passion for spaghetti.³⁴ Crucially, representations of identity include referents that locate subjects in global subjective frames—‘Muslim’, for example, is one of the most powerful referents of our time. Linking subjects to referents and categorising them into existing frames takes place in communication and among communications.³⁵ This is because the ‘connection between what signifies and what is signified’ is constituted by the very language and formal structures that represent the link.³⁶ Representation is reliant on language and is textual, or as Roland Barthes would remind us, textualisable, and can thus be analysed using the methods of discursive analysis.³⁷ In this context, therefore, diplomacy is a practice that not only deals in texts that explain difference, but which also depends on difference to exist.³⁸

Instances of linking/differentiation take place in four dimensions: subjects, space, time, and norms. While each is vital for the categorisation of identity, they contribute to and draw on one another. Representations of subjects include race, birth, culture, and even physical features, but draw heavily on the other three dimensions, which act as explanations of what these subjects want, and why. For example, American diplomacy in the 1940s represented Vietnamese people as ‘indolent’, ‘lazy’, and ‘naturally apolitical’; attributes explained by the location of a backward Asian race in a hot and humid tropical climate.³⁹ Locating subjects in the spatial dimension ascribes attributes framed by geography. The ‘Global South’ or the ‘Middle East’ are examples where geography contributes to how these subjects and their politics are seen.⁴⁰ Locating identity in a temporal dimension frames it within a continuum of development or civilization, as,

34 Connolly, ‘Identity and Difference in Global Politics’; Connolly, William E., *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

35 Constantinou, C. M., O. P. Richmond, and A. Watson, *Cultures and Politics of Global Communication: Volume 34, Review of International Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

36 Foucault, Michel, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Routledge, 2002); Foucault, M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 74.

37 Barthes, Roland, ‘S/Z’, *New York: Hill and Wang* (1974); Barthes, R., *Leçon Inaugurale de La Chaire de Semiotique Littéraire Du Collège de France* (Éditions du Seuil, 1978); Barthes, R., *Image Music Text*, New Ed edition. (London: Fontana Press, 1993).

38 Derian, J. Der, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

39 Bradley, Mark Philip, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

40 See ‘On geography’ in M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

for example, the ‘Orientalised Middle East’ is represented as continually backward,⁴¹ and can additionally frame subjects and events within narratives that create causal links. Normative frames locate actors within existing ethical discourses, representing good and evil by reference to existing normative structures.⁴² The French Resistance, for instance, are not remembered as terrorists (even though their tactics clearly were terrorist) because of their opposition to Nazism. The four frames build politically comprehensible identities that can enable a variety of outcomes, from discourses justifying and requiring violence, to alliances against mutual foes.

This is how text makes identity. Building on this insight, we can move to analyse how diplomacy produces representations of identity, how they change over time, and when they persuade. This, in turn, necessitates the methodological advances developed by the author in order to research how diplomacy writes, reads, and rewrites identity—advances that are possible only thanks to the work of pioneering post-structuralists that have conceptualised and examined diplomacy and identity as text and as practice.⁴³ This method, *the diplomatic text*, is an analytical engine that brings together a rationale for data selection and three textual analysis methods.

Primary data selection focuses on practices of diplomatic knowledge production. This is not limited to the work of professional diplomats, as other agents occasionally carry out diplomatic duties. The standard for selecting evidence is determined as the textual trail of what Constantinou calls ‘embassy of theory’, the diplomatic process constituted by the delegation of the presence of the state.⁴⁴ Consequently, data selection includes classical diplomatic documents such as cables and memoranda, and also speeches, memos, and reports authored by non-diplomats, such as leaders or parliamentarians, but only those that are produced when representing the state.⁴⁵ That is, while US diplomatic cables to

41 Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

42 Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, 206.

43 Particularly Der Derian, *On Diplomacy; Antidiplomacy: Spies, Terror, Speed, and War* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); and Neumann, ‘Self and Other in International Relations’; *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations*, vol. 3 (Hove, East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press, 1996); *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); ‘The English School on Diplomacy: Scholarly Promise Unfulfilled’, *International Relations* 17, № 3 (1 September 2003): 341–369; ‘Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31, № 3 (2002), 627; *At Home with the Diplomats; Diplomatic Sites: A Critical Enquiry*, 2013; Williams, Michael C. and Iver B. Neumann, ‘From Alliance to Security Community: NATO, Russia, and the Power of Identity’, *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 29, № 2 (1 June 2000), 357–387.

44 Constantinou, C. M., *On the Way to Diplomacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

45 This accounts for concern on instances of practice—which I address from the perspective of their investment in text, such as the negotiations studied in Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, ‘Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya’, *European Journal of International Relations* 20, № 4 (1 December 2014), 889–911.

and from Mali total nearly one thousand documents, many are procedural or irrelevant because documents such as invoices do not engage in representation of the state, nor do they describe the actors and agents diplomats are dealing with. Documents analysed for this paper include US diplomatic communication between the US embassies in Bamako and the State Department during 2006–2010, and documents of diplomatic relevance, as per the above selection rationale. We are specifically looking for contextualised descriptions of oneself and others: by US and Malian officials, by representatives from Tuareg groups, especially the Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC), and by other individuals claiming to represent Tuareg grievances. This rationale additionally entails the inclusion of some documents from the US diplomatic mission in Niamey, Niger, reporting on Tuareg issues affecting both Niger and Mali. In US missions, cables are drafted by embassy staff, particularly the Political Officer, the Military Attaché, or the Deputy Head of Mission, or sometimes dictated by the Ambassador. The common reoccurrence of signatures (almost always bearing the Ambassador’s name or that of the Political Officer) is misleading, for this denotes signing off rather than drafting, much as most cables from the State Department are signed with the name of the Secretary.

Cables from missions reveal what American diplomats were reporting back to their superiors in Washington. However, it is also necessary to consider communications from the State Department back to Bamako and Niamey, as well as communications to the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and other missions interested in Sahelian issues, for these documents bear feedback on reporting, assessments, priorities, and instructions, and reveal what Washington officials prioritised, which items from the missions’ reporting they absorbed, and which they did not. In other words, policy developments are clearly reflected in cables from the State Department, which often come replete with citations of work by policy-making bodies such as the National Security Council’s Principals’ Committee. To complete the policy side of the cascade of reporting from the ground up to policymakers, it is necessary to draw also on non-diplomatic documents that are included by the data selection rationale, including public appearances, speeches, and statements by key policymakers in the Senate, the State Department, the Department of Defence, and the White House. The vast majority of the documents are available only due to the leak in 2010 of hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables by Wikileaks, which has allowed analysis to take place before declassification and release, but also imposes limitations including being restricted to the timeframe of leaked documents. Because the method depends on wide documentary availability, it is ideally executed on historical cases, cases with vast leaks such as this one, or from within a diplomatic institution. The documents selected for this analysis

total 413.⁴⁶

The first analytical step determines how a description constitutes and situates an actor. It draws on Foucauldian archaeology which, beyond linguistic analysis of how words suggest meaning, ‘retrieves’ or identifies and examines the modes, rules, and references that make the expression of identity discursively meaningful and subjectively operational. As will be demonstrated in the next section, this step reveals *how* identity works in specific texts, and additionally retrieves textual markers, called *topoi*, that signpost the presence of the specific aspects and architectures of representation. These markers allow the next analytical step—to follow exact representations of political identity across time and countless texts.

The second analytical step maps the chronological evolution of representations across hundreds of texts. This analysis is based on Foucauldian and Nietzschean genealogy, a method used to trace the history of an idea.⁴⁷ Following the textual markers identified in the previous step, it maps which representations thrive, disappear, or change within each diplomatic establishment. This evolution is charted chronologically and across the institution, from the reports of diplomats on the ground to the memoranda handed to policymakers. We are dealing with a number of locutors and authors producing the ‘picture’ that contributed to shaping decisions, including Malian government representatives, US diplomats reporting, Tuareg representatives from various factions or none, Malian Civil society representatives, and policymakers prioritising and deciding and then writing back to the missions abroad. It is across these documents, their categorisation and prioritisation driven by dominant policy concerns, that the American ‘picture’ of events in Mali is forged. That is, it is not only what Malian officials said that matters, but especially how this information was treated on its way back to policymakers’ desks. This will be demonstrated in the fourth section.

The genealogy and the archival research are carried out backwards. They begin with texts denoting that a policy shift had indeed occurred, and travel backwards through the history of those policy-determinant representations to establish their development and provenance. Having mapped the story of specific representations within each country’s diplomatic knowledge production, the third step identifies representations that cross over into the diplomatic knowledge production of another state with which it is in contact. When a representation (e.g. you readers, interested in strategic

46 All Wikileaks documents can be searched by reference number: <https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/> (accessed 25 October 2017).

47 Foucault, Michel, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *Nietzsche*, ed. John Richardson and Brian Leiter (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 139–164; Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, ‘Genealogy of Morals’, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

communications analysis methods) crosses over, is repeated up that country’s chain of diplomatic reporting, and becomes common within it, still carrying the exact same architecture (readers+interest: StratComms+analysis+methods), it is fair to conclude that it was believed and absorbed. This is particularly evident when it begins to shape policy assumptions.

The consequences of identity-making cannot be underestimated. The method used here can uncover and explain the vital identity-making precursors to specific international phenomena, such as securitisation and stigmatisation,⁴⁸ alliances,⁴⁹ and even diplomatic sponsorship affording protection from the international community, which is particularly important for states in dubious normative terrain, such as those occupying or annexing territory, for example, Israel or Morocco.

Step 3: Representations of nomads, terrorism, and crime in US-Malian diplomacy

The first analytical move analyses how US and Malian diplomatic communications represented the conflict, its subjects, contexts, and solutions. The four texts analysed below were selected to represent the most important portrayals in US-Malian diplomatic relations of this period. Crucially, they are texts that illustrate how representations crossed over from one country’s diplomacy to the other’s. This substantiates the above-discussed crossover into US diplomacy of Malian representations of the conflict, and demonstrates how these representations worked and how they are constructed.

The first key text is the report of a meeting on 26 February 2008 between Malian President Touré, the Malian Military Chief of Staff Saydou Traoré, US Ambassador Terence McCulley, and AFRICOM commander General William Ward.⁵⁰ Drafted by Political Officer Aaron Sampson, it is an example of the occasional diplomatic functions of non-diplomats, such as military and government leaders. The ‘continued instability in northern Mali’ is represented as determined by space, military weakness, and Tuareg criminality. Lack of military control of the ‘650,000 sq. km. of terrain in northern Mali’ was due to ‘porous borders’ and especially ‘traffickers looking to turn quick profits by whatever means available’, including collaborating with and enabling al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM]. This representation of northern Mali conjures Wild West-like chaos in ‘vast’ empty spaces inhabited by lawless Tuareg subjects dedicated to ‘banditry’ and ‘trafficking’. In their intrinsic criminality, these subjects constitute the lawless space of northern Mali, and are in turn constituted by that spatial context. In addition, they

48 Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, ‘Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society’, *International Organization* 68, № 01 (January 2014), 143–176.

49 Williams and Neumann, ‘From Alliance to Security Community’.

50 26/2/2008, 08BAMAKO217. To accompany this analysis, the full text is available at: https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAMAKO217_a.html (accessed 15 June 2017).

are solidly set in a temporal frame that represents them as backwards in development and governance.⁵¹ Lawlessness could not be contained due to ‘the Malian military’s lack of resources’, whence the President’s request for American military trucks, arms, and combat helicopters. This was not only a question of matériel, but also of necessary conditions: before Mali is able to fulfil its commitments to the US and TSCTP, it ‘must cut off the routes used by drugs, arms, and human trafficking’.

This aspect of the representation of the security challenge in Mali is vital. Without total and exclusive Malian military control, new hardware, as well as expanded and new garrisons, this situation will continue to enable terrorism. Achieving military control is represented as a necessary condition to any other Malian action in the north, including fighting AQIM and the long-awaited economic development promised in the Algiers Accords. Touré explained that ‘Mali wants to help the US counter Islamic extremism but that Mali must deal with its security issues on its own’. Mali’s future counterterrorism efforts were thus predicated on first finding a military—not social or economic—solution to Tuareg issues. Malian diplomacy consistently represented itself as supportive of the War on Terror, and throughout diplomatic contact with the US repeatedly ‘pledged Mali’s continued strong support for the US in the fight against global terrorism’. At the close of a meeting with Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, American diplomats noted: ‘“You can”, said the President, “count on us”’.⁵² Malian diplomacy was keen to convey that Mali was most willing to help with counterterrorism, but that it needed first to control the Tuareg by military means with US assistance.

This representation of the conflict in the north, its context, dynamics, and solutions, appears in a US embassy report a year later.⁵³ The cable to the State Department discusses whether the defeat of veteran Tuareg rebel Ibrahim ag Bahanga might finally ‘enable northern units commanded by Bamako to turn their sights on other pressing northern security matters including AQIM’. The importance of this cable cannot be overstated. It contains the same articulation of the Malian security challenge discussed above: military control of the Tuareg to be followed by the implementation of the Algiers Accords and counterterrorism operations. Remarkably, it is posited as a policy assumption, demonstrating that the military-first approach desired by Bamako had been absorbed into US policy together with the representation of the Tuareg problem.

51 For the an analysis of this Orientalist representation of this space and subjects, see Vatin, Jean-Claude, ‘Désert Construit et Inventé, Sahara Perdu Ou Retrouvé: Le Jeu Des Imaginaires’, *Revue de l’Occident Musulman et de La Méditerranée* 37, No 1 (1984), 107–131. For a contemporary American popular culture expression of this lawless desert imaginary, see the TV show ‘American Odyssey’, 2015.

52 28/11/2007, 07BAMAKO1361. https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAMAKO1361_a.html (accessed 15 June 2017).

53 12/2/2009, 09BAMAKO85.

This document furthermore denotes absorption of the nomads of northern Mali into existing War on Terror categories of facilitators and occasional participants in terrorism, i.e. AQIM. This is a vital insight because it suggests that there was no precise policy decision that Malian nomads facilitated or participated in terrorism. Rather, we are observing a far smaller step: the inclusion of these subjects into the existing category of North African terrorists.

The military-first solution relied heavily on representing Tuareg subjects not only as occasional smugglers and petty criminals, but as inherently lawless professional felons. This representation focused on rebel leader Ibrahim ag Bahanga, who in 2007 refused to disarm and held out with a small force in Tin Zaouatine, on the Algerian border. Until he was defeated in 2009, Malian diplomacy consistently described him as a bandit interested only in trafficking. A cable detailing a meeting between Malian Foreign Minister Moustapha Ouane and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Todd Moss reports that Ouane described Bahanga’s rebels as ‘a small number of Tuareg bandits’.⁵⁴ ‘[B]andits like Ibrahim Bahanga’, Ouane explained, ‘had no political motivations, had formulated no political demands, and were solely interested in securing a portion of Malian territory for illicit trafficking’.

Malian diplomacy consistently represented the Tuareg way of life as based on smuggling,⁵⁵ crime, and conflict motivated by greed.⁵⁶ This is a powerful normative frame that depoliticises Tuareg rebellion, pulling these subjects and their war out of the possibility of ethical conflict. Another consequence is that engagement in negotiations or obtaining help against AQIM appears unthinkable. This is, of course, untrue. Many Tuareg call themselves ‘businessmen’ with better reason than any, having traded and controlled Saharan routes for over a millennium.⁵⁷ This representation reinforces Malian arguments that their very presence, if unsupervised, enables terrorism because they would have no qualms about supporting AQIM for profit.

This representation was fully and unproblematically absorbed into US diplomatic reporting. In a response from October 2008 to a State Department enquiry on why ‘president Toure appears reluctant to enter into negotiations with Bahanga’, the US Embassy explains that ‘Bahanga’s overriding interest appears to be carving out Tinzawaten [sic] as a personal fiefdom to secure revenues from drugs, arms and

54 13/6/2008, 08BAMAKO558. https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAMAKO558_a.html (accessed 15 June 2017).

55 08/07/2008, 08BAMAKO639.

56 See for example 9/1/2009, 09BAMAKO12 and 11/12/2008, 08BAMAKO932.

57 Bøås and Torheim, ‘The Trouble in Mali—corruption, Collusion, Resistance’, 1281. Considering their military successes as well as those of POLISARIO 1975–87, it should be conceivable, as they have themselves often suggested, to draw on their expertise in desert warfare.

cigarette trafficking'.⁵⁸ This is the same description delivered by Foreign Minister Ouane in the above-analysed meeting, expounded in exactly the same articulation and similar wording—though using the more medieval-sounding term 'fiefdom'. This does not have to be seen as a manipulative lie; it was common opinion in Bamako at the time, and thus this act of persuasion may not have been instrumental. Crucially, its relevance for this analysis is that its core conceptualisation and depiction was carried over to US reporting on the issue. Believing this representation of the Tuareg and their criminality—driven by the depoliticisation of Bahanga and his cause—was a catastrophic mistake for US diplomats and policymakers. After the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, Bahanga rallied armed Tuaregs in Libya to the banner of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which in 2012 launched the biggest Tuareg uprising since Malian independence.

These representations and their constituent discursive elements were effective, and were soon absorbed into US thinking on the issue as reflected in the diplomatic correspondence. In this picture, lawless and vast ungoverned spaces inhabited by opportunistic and determined criminals like Bahanga cohered with the need for military control. Malian military weakness, the War on Terror, and the presence of AQIM in the Malian-Algerian borderlands provided the urgency for the gradual shift away from the previous development-based approach. The (mis)perception of Tuareg criminality sabotaged the ethics of preventing extremism through development, sustaining the notion that unpoliced Tuaregs enabled AQIM. This representation of the conflict, and its context and subjects, provided the tenets for a policy shift that made sense in the context of the War on Terror. Understanding the construction of this representation of the conflict, however, raises the question of how it found its way into American diplomacy.

Step 4: The evolution of textual representations of identity 2006–2010

The previous section analysed the inner workings of the representation of the conflict as absorbed by US diplomacy and policy. We now move to determine the history of this event by tracing the origins and conditions of the representation. This involves taking an intertextual and trans-institutional perspective, establishing how representations crossed between diplomatic institutions and the conditions that made this possible. This takes the analysis back in time from the texts analysed in the previous section, and back and forth between the Malian and American diplomatic institutions concerned.

⁵⁸ 3/10/2008, 08BAMAKO824. https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAMAKO824_a.html (accessed 15 June 2017).

Mapping the development of representations during 2006–2010 reveals several shifts. Malian diplomacy depicted a conflict driven by greed, rather than by political grievances. This became particularly persistent after the ADC signed the Algiers Accords with Mali in July 2006, leaving only Bahanga's Tuareg faction still fighting. Between 2006 and Bahanga's death in 2011, he and all Tuareg in arms were described as criminals, feeding the need for military control *before* implementing the Algiers Accords. These representations were absorbed into US diplomacy in mid-2008 and late 2008 respectively. Tuareg descriptions of the conflict during 2006–2012 consistently focused on Malian unwillingness to implement the Algiers Accords, the need for development, the need to end abuses by Malian troops and militias, and the formation of mixed Malian-Tuareg military units. Furthermore, they repeatedly requested to collaborate in anti-AQIM efforts. The only Tuareg complaint that had an impact, in early 2009, was their representation of Malian human rights abuses.

While US diplomacy initially regarded development and cooperative security arrangements as vital to counter-extremism security, from late 2008 these concerns took a lesser role as focus shifted to Tuareg criminality and the need for military control. This policy shift, it is found, was not the result of a specific and explicit decision about Mali. No evidence was found of an NSC [National Security Council], DoD, or State decision to move US policy toward Mali from a development to a counterterrorism approach based on control of subjects and space. While such a decision might yet emerge upon declassification, the diplomatic data available does not reference or seem to defer to a new policy decision about Mali. Rather, by October 2009 we find that in terms of diplomatic reporting, interagency operations, military policy, and even espionage, Mali has been fully absorbed into the broader sweep of the assumptions and methods of the War on Terror in the Sahel.

These events raise questions as to the conditions that enabled them. First, why didn't representations of nomadic criminality cross over to US diplomacy before early 2008, and why didn't the military-first approach make the crossover until late 2008, despite Malian constancy during 2006–2008? Second, why were Tuareg allegations of major human rights abuses believable in 2009 and not before?

Mali relentlessly restated its commitment to counterterrorism and the need for a Tuareg-first military approach. Before the exchange with General Ward analysed above, President Touré met President Bush and declared that Mali adhered to 'all different initiatives on the fight against terrorism'.⁵⁹ This conversation, however, did not include a full articulation of the representation of the conflict, and did not yield significant policy results. In a far more influential precursor, a conference in January 2008 on TSCTP,

⁵⁹ 12/2/08, Office of the Press Secretary, White House.

French officials linked ungoverned space, trafficking, insurgency, and AQIM. Widely disseminated among the American diplomatic and security community, it likely added credence to Malian claims and prepared the ground for their later admissibility.⁶⁰

Previous attempts to persuade US diplomats and policymakers were not effective. An excellent example is an exchange between Touré and Deputy Secretary Negroponte, which featured the same representation of the conflict including ‘bandits’, ‘more than 7,000 km’ of borders, and the need to control the north before counterterrorism efforts were possible.⁶¹ American diplomats and policymakers did, however, consider Mali an important ally in the global war on terrorism and a key member of [TSCTP].⁶² Touré’s own regional counterterrorism initiative, a counterterrorism law, requests from Foreign Minister Ouane for State Department meetings in 2007, and even an offer to host the AFRICOM headquarters in Bamako, garnered sympathy but no change in the development-first policy.⁶³

In the early 2000s the Bush administration was enthusiastic about Malian democracy. In this context, ATT and his consensus approach were regarded, particularly by Secretary Rice, as having succeeded in nurturing and furthering democracy in Mali and bringing the country closer to Western economic development.⁶⁴ Former Ambassador to Mali Robert Pringle called Malian democracy ‘a transformation that seems nothing short of amazing’.⁶⁵ Rapprochement was therefore facilitated by seeing Mali as a successful democracy, a representation that Malian diplomats assiduously reiterated and highlighted with comparison to Niger’s brutal repression of a 2007 Tuareg revolt.⁶⁶ Backtracking to early 2007, US diplomacy still saw development as key to ensuring peace and countering extremism. Diplomats were keenly aware that ‘should development efforts lag, violent outbreaks may reoccur’, and that US influence should be used to encourage peaceful resolution and development.⁶⁷ Earlier, in 2006, US diplomats did not even believe in Mali’s counterterrorist commitment, writing puzzled and politely frustrated reports that even rebel Tuareg ADC forces were fighting AQIM, while Mali had never tried.⁶⁸

60 18/3/2008, 08STATE28385.

61 28/11/2007, 07BAMAKO1361.

62 2/6/2008, 08BAMAKO491; 12/12/2008, 08BAMAKO937.

63 18/9/2007, 07BAMAKO1028; 14/2/2007, 07BAMAKO166; 16/7/2008, 08BAMAKO660; 22/7/2008, 08BAMAKO676; 1/10/2008, 08BAMAKO821; 29/9/2008, 08BAMAKO817; 11/4/2008, 08BAMAKO357.

64 See for instance Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information, ‘Remarks at the Community of Democracies UNGA Event – Secretary Condoleezza Rice’.

65 Pringle, Robert, ‘Mali’s Unlikely Democracy’, *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 30, № 2 (2006), 31.

66 19/6/2008, 08BAMAKO574; 22/12/2008, 08BAMAKO956; 13/6/2008, 08BAMAKO558.

67 3/4/2007, 07BAMAKO374.

68 31/10/2006, 06BAMAKO1244.

Malian depictions of the conflict depended on ‘Tuareg criminality’—a key enabler of the Tuareg-first military approach. This representation was energetically promoted by Malian diplomats and officials in almost every communication studied. Even peaceful Tuareg protests were turned into ‘ransacking’, forcing Malian troops to ‘fire in self-defence’.⁶⁹ On the day of his inauguration in June 2007, for example, President Touré explained that some Tuaregs ‘provide logistical support to AQIM’ for profit, positing a vision of self-serving violent crime.⁷⁰ A cable from late 2008 titled ‘Bahanga runs amok’, suggests that US understanding of the conflict was deeply affected by the representation of Tuareg criminality as a way of life, stating that ‘harassing the Malian military is a part-time diversion from their full-time job trafficking drugs, guns and contraband’ and that Tuaregs were themselves in constant internecine conflict.⁷¹ Backtracking to late 2007, however, it can be seen that US diplomats and policy did not hold such assumptions and still regarded justice, peace, and development initiatives as key. A May 2007 report, for example, carries a nuanced description of Bahanga’s rebellion and its cause, and, while it is stated that he had trafficking experience, he is described as a veteran of the 1990 rebellion, frustrated by the failure to implement the Algiers Accords.⁷² Likewise, the reinsertion and reconciliation of Tuareg rebels in neighbouring Niger was commended as an effective measure of great counterterrorism value; a stark contrast with the shift in late 2008.⁷³

Tuareg leaders and mediators were keen to remonstrate their grievances to US diplomats. When questioned on the murder of Tuaregs by Malian troops in 2008, ‘top rebel’ Ag Bibi mused that there was ‘no chance Mali would ever investigate the murders’.⁷⁴ National Assembly member Ibrahim Mohamed Asselah told embassy officials that they needed ‘infrastructure’ and ‘wells for their communities and animals’, but that ‘he was sure the nomadic groups would never receive these wells’.⁷⁵ Tuareg demands were constant: reduction of the Malian military presence in northern towns, the ‘creation of mixed military units’ for security, and the investigation of ‘summary executions’.⁷⁶ Discussing terrorism, ADC leader Deity ag Simadou ‘complained about alleged GOM [Government of Mali] diversion of counterterrorism funds to combat Tuareg rebels’ and ‘charged that several Malian officials were working with AQIM to secure a percentage of any eventual ransom’.⁷⁷ Tuareg leaders frequently suggested that

69 19/11/2008, 08BAMAKO898.

70 19/6/2007, 07BAMAKO676.

71 29/12/2008, 08BAMAKO968; 8/7/2008, 08BAMAKO639.

72 10/5/2007, 07BAMAKO505.

73 10/10/2006, 06NIAMEY113, see also 31/10/2007, 07STATE151024

74 11/12/2008, 08BAMAKO932.

75 14/11/2008, 08BAMAKO888.

76 6/5/2008, 08BAMAKO419.

77 21/5/2008, 08BAMAKO462.

they could help fight terrorism, recounting with pride two battles in 2006, when the ADC alone had taken the fight to AQIM—significantly, this was the unit commanded by Mokhtar Belmokhtar.⁷⁸

Tuareg claims did not make a significant impact on the US understanding of the conflict. While the need for economic and cooperative security development was well appreciated, few Tuareg grievances were ever reported as reliable by US diplomats. This is curious considering that allegations featured events as horrific as Malian-sponsored militias led by Colonel Meydou executing Tuaregs by crushing their skulls with military vehicles,⁷⁹ though in sum it is fair to conclude that by the mid-2000s, diplomatic portrayals of the Tuareg as victims were very ineffective.⁸⁰ Allegations were taken seriously only in 2009, when the Malian military denied the International Committee of the Red Cross access to prisoners feared tortured or executed, revealing attitudes of perceived unreliability to Tuareg communications.⁸¹

During this period, the US embassy in Bamako developed considerable expertise and strove to provide an advanced understanding of Malian issues. They employed a Tuareg assistant, maintained contact with most major Tuareg factions and leaders, reported on the finer details of the ethnic, clan, and tribal structures of the Tuareg and of the Hassaniya Arabs of the north, and even canvassed voters before elections.⁸² Far more sanguine about the ‘need for forward movement on the Algiers Accords’ than most policymakers in DC,⁸³ the embassy in Bamako warned that unaddressed grievances would fuel an uprising and frequently advised that the US pressure Mali to implement the Accords.⁸⁴ It is found that, when they denied that ‘Tuareg smugglers or bandits have any religious or ideological links with AQIM’, or remarked that the ADC had attacked AQIM twice in 2006, this was not reported further up the chain for analysis in Washington.⁸⁵ In sum, reports from diplomats during 2008–2010 that were primarily concerned with justice and development as a solution had little influence

78 21/5/2008, 08BAMAKO462; 13/9/2007, 07BAMAKO1006; 31/5/2007, 07BAMAKO587.

79 See 27/4/2009, 09BAMAKO257; 21/4/2008, 08BAMAKO375 and earlier.

80 See for example Zounmenou, David, ‘Rethinking the Tuareg Factor in the Mali Crisis’, *Conflict Trends* 2013, № 3 (1 January 2013): 16–23.

81 6/3/2009, 09BAMAKO141.

82 17/4/2008, 08BAMAKO371; 15/12/2006, 06BAMAKO1415.

83 Senator Chris Coons, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on African Affairs, is an important exception.

84 2/6/2008, 08BAMAKO491; 6/3/2008, 08BAMAKO239; 3/10/2008, 08BAMAKO824; 21/4/2008, 08BAMAKO375; 7/4/2008, 08BAMAKO339.

85 17/4/2008, 08BAMAKO371; 6/3/2008, 08BAMAKO239.

on how officials in Washington saw the situation.⁸⁶ Reports on security concerns and individuals, however, received far greater attention.

Malian representations of the conflict were, conversely, very effective in engaging dominant US policy concerns. This does not, however, explain why they were effective in late 2008 and not before. There was another powerful factor at work: instructions from policymakers at the level of the State Department and above. The history of the two key representations, and the fate of nuanced and detailed reporting from the Bamako mission, point to practices of prioritisation governing the salience of particular perspectives and items of information. A cable from March 2003 mentions that Mali ‘is now a EUCOM/AFRICOM high priority country within the context of [TSCTP]’, a shift in practice described as in-progress.⁸⁷ This suggests that there was a militarisation of reporting and a move to allow AFRICOM to lead initiatives hitherto led by the State Department. These practices determined what dominant policy concerns looked like, which is why the same Malian representation of the conflict failed to persuade in late 2007, but succeeded in late 2008. This is why the lack of a specific strategic decision concerning Mali makes sense: an increased prioritisation of security concerns subsumed Mali into the existing categories, knowledge, and methods of the global War on Terror. The devil lies, therefore, in the finer bureaucratic details—all the categories into which northern Malian nomads were subsumed already existed, which is probably why a specific policy decision appears absent and we see a procedural, rather automatic, shift to include Mali into global counterterrorism approaches.

The self-disciplining of diplomatic knowledge production can be traced in communications from the State Department. A cable congratulating the Bamako mission on its reporting reveals which information the Department was interested in, implying that it was read entirely through a security lens, and analysed by individuals and institutions such as the NSC’s Senior Director for Counterterrorism and ‘senior policymakers from the Department of Homeland Security, FBI, and the Department of Defense’.⁸⁸ The commended cables concerned primarily biographic lists, links to trans-Saharan crime, and Mali’s only strike ever against AQIM in 2009.⁸⁹ Writing was heavily conditioned by a set of instructions on ‘reporting and collection needs: West Africa’. An update of the National Intelligence Priorities Framework (NIPF) of 24 February 2003, the instructions subsumed State Department reporting into intelligence

⁸⁶ An excellent example is cable 08BAMAKO485, which is never referenced again. For a detailed discussion on this problem, see Pablo de Orellana, ‘When Diplomacy Identifies Terrorists: Subjects, Identity and Agency in the War On Terror in Mali’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁸⁷ 3/3/2008, 08BAMAKO219.

⁸⁸ 24/9/2009, 09STATE99793.

⁸⁹ See for instance 31/7/2008, 08BAMAKO695

needs. This was not problematic per se, except that it framed and directed diplomatic knowledge production around military and intelligence needs, inheriting assumptions from these fields of practice. For instance, reports on ‘insurgents’ and ‘separatists’ were filed into the same reporting category. The new instructions did not request reporting on the goals of such groups, but focused instead on their capability to ‘destabilize host country government’, ‘links to international terrorist groups’, and ‘criminal activity’, stripping the context from these reports and placing all ‘criminal activity’ in the context of terrorism. This is a self-sabotaging lack of nuance that, in our case, strips the politics out of Tuareg activity due to centrally mandated lack of context.⁹⁰

Another interesting revelation that emerges from this analysis concerns policy differences between the Bush and Obama governments. While a sharp break in policy and its underlying assumptions might be expected, this was not observed in US diplomacy and its resulting policy concerning Mali and the Western Sahel. Despite her earlier expertise, Condoleezza Rice had little interest in Africa after the Cold War, and during her tenure as National Security Advisor, and later as Secretary of State, her work on Africa concentrated on economic liberalisation, particularly privatisation and the Millennium Development Compact.⁹¹ Her successor Hillary Clinton did not drive any major development in North African policy until the Libyan crisis erupted in 2011. At the Department of Defense, Robert Gates provided continuity in Mali and Sahel policy, particularly with his establishment of AFRICOM in late 2007 and its key security initiatives in 2009, bridging the Bush-Obama transition.⁹² The analysis here suggests that neither administration dedicated much policy effort to Mali until 2012. An exception was the effort Secretary Rice invested in the Millennium Challenge Corporation,⁹³ which sought to promote democratic prosperity through development aid and a privatisation drive.⁹⁴ Despite the transition to the Obama administration, the AFRICOM-led interagency approach to counter-terrorism in the Sahel remained focused on unchanged ‘country-specific requirements and strategies’.⁹⁵ One notable exception

90 16/4/2009, 09STATE37566.

91 See Lusane, Clarence, *Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice: Foreign Policy, Race, and the New American Century* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 135–8.

92 Harmon, Stephen A., *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013* (London: Routledge, 2016), 137.

93 Bureau of Public Affairs Department Of State, ‘Remarks at Signing Ceremony for Millennium Challenge Corporation’s Compact with the Republic of Mali – Secretary Condoleezza Rice and Ambassador Danilovich’, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/75871.htm> (accessed 24 October 2017); Bureau of Public Affairs Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information, ‘Remarks at the Community of Democracies UNGA Event – Secretary Condoleezza Rice’, 1 October 2007: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/10/93344.htm>

94 23/5/2006, 06NIAMEY515

95 11/4/2009, 09STATE35882

was increased US policy concern about trafficking and slavery passing through Mali.⁹⁶

Analysis of Malian-US relations unveils a conjunction of factors behind the discursive success of Malian descriptions of its northern subjects. These include dominant policy concerns about global terror and bureaucratic prioritisation practices focusing on terror and terror enablers, which had significant effects on diplomatic interactions that sought to make sense of events in terms of these global factors. This is what enabled the subsumption of many of Mali’s northern peoples into the global drive against terror. This conjunction of factors was key to these subjects being simply absorbed into the knowledge and methods of the War on Terror, as evidenced in the NIPF instructions to American diplomats, rather than being the subject of a Mali-specific decision. To summarise, the policy shift of 2008 was predicated on an absorption of Malian representation of its northern subjects and on the conflict itself. The crucial representations that crossed over into the US understanding of the conflict, despite the qualms of diplomats on the ground, were those of nomads as opportunistic bandits who engaged with terrorists for profit (this is how Bahanga was so spectacularly depoliticised), and those of the conflict necessitating a military-first approach, which came to be defined as control of subjects and territory. It is in the context of knowledge-production for policy that a discussion or decision specific to Mali might seem less necessary than a simple recategorisation of the Malian issue in terms of the War on Terror. This shift would seem logical only in this specific set of circumstances, and not before late 2008.

This is how Malian representation of Tuareg subjects and their extremely tenuous links to AQIM came to justify a policy shift. This was unnecessary, considering US diplomats in Bamako were remarkably well informed. My research on representations of identity in diplomatic knowledge production has found this to be a surprisingly common phenomenon. In other words, policymakers can discipline diplomacy’s reporting from abroad to see what they prioritise seeing and, of course, to choose what to read and what to believe; however, in excess this practice constitutes self-sabotage. This is not necessarily a failure caused by selective intelligence analysis, such as that leading to the Iraq invasion in 2003.⁹⁷ Rather, this is the result of practices that discipline an institution’s knowledge production. For a Foucauldian IR theorist, this is a fascinating example of epistemological power in practice, for we are witnessing the practices that govern, produce, and discipline knowledge. This is far more pervasive than ignoring certain reports. This is a process that limits both the writing and the reading of information, resulting in a lack of essential nuance, context, and detail in

⁹⁶ 5/11/2009, 09STATE114215

⁹⁷ Fitzgerald, Michael and Richard Ned Lebow, ‘Iraq: The Mother of All Intelligence Failures’, *Intelligence and National Security* 21, № 5 (1 October 2006), 884–909.

the US policy regarding Mali. Crucially, it created the conditions, including urgency, for Malian representations of the conflict to be more believable—they responded better to dominant policy concerns and knowledge-governing practices than the work of US diplomats. Thus it is that through representations of identity carried in diplomacy that Mali obtained unlikely influence over US policy.

Step 5: Nomads wrapped in terror? Conclusions on Mali regarding strategic communications

This paper has expounded a conceptually informed method designed to retrieve how diplomatic communication constitutes representations of subjects, territory, time, and politics. Putting this analytical engine to work, it has explored the linguistic and discursive topography of the conflict over the meaning and significance of Tuareg presence, activity, grievances, and insurgency. It has shown the role played by identity-making in representing people, space, and conflict in US-Malian diplomacy, identifying the exact instances when Malian representations of the conflict came to influence the US understanding of the conflict. Analysis found that the conditions that enabled this event were not only contextual, but also pertained to American diplomatic and policy priorities and practices instituted during the War on Terror.

Understanding the role played by the representations of conflict and of its context in Malian-US relations in the 2000s holds vital lessons. The first lesson is methodological. This paper demonstrates the usefulness of conceptually informed discourse analysis methods that pinpoint how reality is constituted in words, comparisons, writing, text, and relations among texts. In terms of policy analysis and research, this means that it is worthwhile paying attention to the way representations are constituted. This is relevant not only to the practice of strategic communications, but also to an empirical assessment of its effects, effectiveness, risks, and, particularly, to understanding how they work. In other words, it is worth analysing the power of descriptions that are, ultimately, one of the key ways through which political events can be reported on a page. Methods such as the one expounded and applied in this paper, can reveal how words, language, comparisons, and associations constitute the ‘reality’ that informs policy.

Conceptually, this research shows that identity-making in diplomatic communication is a powerful and influential aspect of international relations. Furthermore, it pays tribute to the old post-structuralist adage that words, language, and how they constitute subjectivity, are of vital importance in constituting how the world is seen and dealt with. Identity, it emerges, is a key aspect of how the world is understood. More broadly, while theories exploring epistemology might seem impenetrable and philosophically indulgent, they can yield a greater understanding of events occurring in the delicate conceptual limbo between what is known and how something is known.

Two lessons emerge for diplomacy. First, it is worth reading the work of diplomats on the ground in more detail, particularly when resources and effort have been expended to make them as well-informed, nuanced, and detailed in their local understanding as the American diplomats in Bamako were during the 2000s. In other words, their work went unheeded though their advice might have helped avert the disaster of 2012. Second, it should be clear that disciplining diplomatic knowledge production to make it useful to seemingly more important, immediate, and ‘powerful’ practices, such as intelligence and military strategy, can have unintended medium- and long-term consequences. In this case, such disciplinary practices made it possible for the northern Malian issue to become subsumed in 2008 into the strong categories of the War on Terror. That is, it was a case of reclassification into the concerns of the Global War on Terror, its assumptions and methods, departing from a more localised understanding of the issues involved. This recategorisation was, of course, not only born of Malian diplomacy, it depended on the broad and global categories of the counterterrorism policy of the 2000s. This suggests that the very presence of broad, global policy categories and assumptions that can be found at the core of most government policy is an enabling factor for slippages in meaning and precision, which can appear very minor at one level, but which can lead to major changes in policy application on the ground.

For policymaking, this research shows that it can be counterproductive to err too far on the side of focused prioritisation of information as it is produced and written. This creates a self-fulfilling loop where policymakers risk seeing only what they expect to see, and other information of potential importance is discarded as irrelevant. This was the case with much of the detail collected by diplomats on the Tuareg’s grievances, their relations with AQIM, and their relevance to the War on Terror. Ultimately, this resulted in a lost opportunity to counter extremism, promote peace in northern Mali, and destroy AQIM. While diplomacy is not the totality of information gathering and decision-making, it is a site where other knowledge-production and policy practices of government are reflected. This is how this study of diplomacy was able to take into account other institutions, such as the NSC, and their knowledge production, and infer that the policy shift went unchallenged in Washington. Further, in terms of policy agency, the heavy dominance of counterterrorism concerns allowed Mali—as well as most north African states—to obtain US assistance which was, conversely, mostly invested against old enemies and not against terrorists. This means that while clear policy concerns and priorities issued from the top focus minds, they also render policymaking vulnerable to representations that resonate with or appear to address these concerns.

For strategic communications, the lesson is evident: identity-making is crucial to the exercise of communicative influence, and this paper has shown how. The diplomatic strategic communications success of one of the world’s poorest countries shows that it is not always evident who is most susceptible to instrumental approaches to diplomatic

communication. Finally, this paper should serve as a warning about the unintended consequences of strategic communications power. The spectacular and unlikely strategic communications victory of Touré's Malian government obtained a discreet but significant reversal of the American development-first approach to the Sahel. The militarisation of Saharan security initiatives meant that the reversal was accompanied by significant military and training assistance to Malian forces, which inevitably came to be invested against the Tuareg.

It would be disingenuous to believe that these diplomatic and policy events did not contribute to the staggering MNLA-led Tuareg uprising that followed in early 2012. The 'bandit' Bahanga, seeking to carve out a 'trafficking fiefdom', turned out to be deeply committed to the Tuareg cause, and from exile in Libya rallied thousands of young recruits and of veterans of the 1990 uprising to the MNLA. He was so important to the grouping of various Tuareg clans and individuals into the MNLA rebel alliance that his death in August 2011 resulted in a significant degradation of its unity, cohesion, core networks, and leadership.⁹⁸

By late 2012, northern Mali had collapsed into disaster. The uprising by the Tuareg and Arab minorities in the north was overtaken by the rapid advance of Islamic insurgents, Ansar Dine, and the AQIM offshoot Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, (MUJAO). In Bamako, a small group of officers staged a coup protesting President Touré's failure to hold the country together. Soon the Tuareg were defeated by Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO, leading to a French intervention that only restored the problematic status quo ante and caused the exodus of tens of thousands of Tuareg into precarious exile across the Sahara. Following its strategic communications triumph, Touré's administration collapsed due to its own success in avoiding the implementation of the Algiers Accords. US policy failed in its goal to combat extremism and came to unwittingly facilitate an Islamic takeover, while northern Mali's problems remain unaddressed. Such is the price of persuasion.

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98 Walther, Olivier J. and Dimitris Christopoulos, 'Islamic Terrorism and the Malian Rebellion', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, № 3 (27 May 2015), 513.

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